

earth|atmosphere ceramics by halima cassell

Bilston Craft Gallery





earth|atmosphere



Above: Halima Cassell carving into clay in her studio Front cover: detail of carved work, burnished, unfired, clay from the UK

halima cassell | the shape of things

ere's a question, reader: where are you from? For some this is a simple question that requires an equally simple response. Yet for others it could be perceived as

a potentially loaded choice between a potted history of your family tree and the places where you grew up. But however you positively answer this question you implicitly position where you are not from, and what you are not. Our identities may be self-constructed to some extent, but they are also constructed by other people. This writer may believe herself to be Scottish, but to others her accent and family tree reveal another story. For the artist Halima Cassell, who was born in the Kashmir region of Pakistan but brought up in the north of England, she is a British Asian. However, during a recent trip to her 'homeland' of Pakistan she was regularly introduced as a foreigner, as a 'Britisher'. Such experiences are significant to Cassell and inform her work. And yet, as her work for the shape of things demonstrates, our perceptions of 'difference' can, once examined, reveal what is essentially familiar.

Halima Cassell is an artist who works mostly in clay. Her work could be characterised as giving dimension to pattern, but it is pattern of an ambiguous kind. It is difficult to situate Cassell's work in the context of any one region or style, for her carved clay forms seem to elude definition. Indeed to a significant extent, it is the delocalised character of her ornament that resonates with the central themes of *the shape of things*: the contemporary diversity of cultural identity in the UK and how this is reflected and explored in contemporary craft. Cassell's appropriation of pattern utilises the universal qualities of geometry and invites the viewer to project him or herself into the work. One person might easily see interlacing Celtic knots, while another might perceive the repeating symmetries of Islamic tiles, and yet another could discern West African printed textiles. In other words, pattern can say more about the reader than the maker.

The significance of pattern can be placed in a historical context. During the mid-19th century the identity of ornament and its proper usage became a fiercely divisive issue. For some ornament became the defining attribute by which national identities were expressed and upheld. The architect A.W.N. Pugin, and later the writer John Ruskin, argued that the Gothic style captured an uncorrupted, pious Englishness. This salvation by pattern seems over-stated to us now but this was a period when even the most mundane of objects could be deemed moral – and inversely, immoral; *trompe l'oeil* wallpapers could corrupt domestic spaces through their seductive illusionism, Neo-Classical candlesticks could be considered pagan, and thus lacking the values befitting a Christian country.

While some Victorian commentators took very defined positions on correct and corrupt decoration, others took a more universalising 'scientific' approach. The architect and designer Owen Jones believed that formal diversity of pattern arose from a series of common design principles. His central contribution to this fevered debate was The Grammar of Ornament (1856). This beautifully produced book was illustrated with patterns of every kind from across the globe and many periods of history, recorded from a wide variety of sources including architecture, ceramics, jewellery, and woodwork. As the title suggests, Jones' book was intended to instruct readers in the 'best' examples of ornament, and common rules and principles of good decorative expression. Each colour plate sought to educate and reform - whether proposing illustrated Greek scrolling for ceramics, or Celtic interlacing for jewellery. In a rapidly expanding world Jones proposed a design language that recorded and ordered the extraordinary variety of cultures that middle class Europeans were encountering. At the same time the Grammar responded to the new material wealth of the mid-19th century and was widely used as a sourcebook for manufactured products by designers and industry.

Cassell's fascination with a wealth of decorative traditions captures something of the universalism of Jones' project. For *Earth* |*Atmosphere* and *the shape of things* she has experimented with a range of clays sourced from all over the world, including Japan, Israel and Pakistan. Although many of these clays were new to her and presented technical challenges, each was chosen for both its formal qualities – colour and strength – and its symbolic qualities. In fact, a further theme in Cassell's contribution to this exhibition lies in the symbolic nature of her medium. Each clay was dug out of the ground – some crudely by hand, others by machine – and yet despite their differences, they all remain clay. For Cassell, we are all made from clay, we come from clay, and we end up as clay.

A confident technical maker as well as an artist, Cassell has explored many different variants of form and material, but often returns to the hemispherical, bowl-like, clay shapes which dominate her work. These curvilinear forms in earthy hues are generous, motherly even. They simultaneously suggest effortless selfgeneration, and skilled labour-intensive production of the complex form. Each piece undergoes four consecutive stages, firstly hitting out the basic form. It's important, according to Cassell, to avoid handling the clay more than necessary, as this can result in air bubbles which may cause the work to explode in the kiln. The second stage the artist calls 'shorthand', where she conceives and develops the design; thirdly she mathematically divides the surface area of the form and marks out the design. Incidentally, Cassell recalls sitting her GCSE Maths exam three times. She failed on each occasion, despite showing talent during class. This was, she realised later, attributable to undiagnosed Dyslexia. Fortunately, her love of mathematics and geometry survived, and finds expression in the arcs and angles of her carvings.

Carving is the final stage of the making process and for Cassell it is a meditative, but immensely physical, process from which she derives a lot of pleasure. Such enjoyment is possible because by this stage the direction of every plane has been precisely planned, to the extent that Cassell is able to identify exactly where she must carve downwards and inwards, and when to stop. Thus carving becomes a visceral process because, although springing from a meticulously mapped intention, the planning is complete. The resulting forms, while massive, have a fluid vibrancy generated by the bold lines and *chiaroscuoro* of the deep carving. The contrast between light and shadow in some pieces generates an almost optical effect of movement as made famous in the paintings of Bridget Riley. Cassell has tried glazing her work in the past but felt this reflective layer dulled the defined edges of her work. By avoiding glazes the qualities of the clay can emerge, and her work's edges remain sharp and distinct.

Cassell seeks inspiration from a diverse range of sources but above all she is fascinated by architecture, especially buildings where elements have been carved by hand. The contours and shadows of these carvings are part of this allure, but it is the notion that these structures have a live presence that particularly enthrals her. Many of her favourites include Gothic cathedrals; to Cassell they represent live sculptures as these buildings take on varying characters and moods, depending on the weather conditions or the light.

It is striking that Cassell should admire the beauty in Gothic cathedrals, for Gothic was originally known as the 'French style', arriving in England because of the French cultural hegemony during the early Middle Ages. Moreover, it was a style meant to reflect the unity of the French Kings, and as such the unity of France as a whole. Yet the stylistic characteristics of the Gothic borrow heavily from the Romanesque, early Islamic design, and even Roman vaulting systems. Therefore, to see the Gothic as expressing essentially English qualities – as Pugin and others did – is to ignore historical events. Pugin's Neo-Gothic Houses of Parliament was understood to reflect traditional Christian values, native English qualities, and a home-grown vernacular traceable back to the Medieval period. This historical revisionism might be simply attributed to the national chauvinism of the age, and yet design history is littered with examples of cultural icons whose perceived Britishness can be exposed as multicultural palimpsests – a Paisley shawl for instance, or the Willow Pattern.

This sense of mutable layers of cultural reference is equally present in Cassell's work, but unlike polemicists, she does not seek to obscure this multi-valence. For her work is not ideological in that sense. Cassell creates beauty out of mud. She imagines fundamental shapes repeating and metamorphosing, and gives them threedimensional form. As in a chaotic system each design can evolve many permutations at each line, intersection, and angle. Cassell's work encompasses and generates complexity and surprise. All of her sculptural work shares a language of geometry and volume but each is intriguingly different. For Cassell, a self-proclaimed 'Britisher', it is important to expose 'difference' as merely superficial. Her work challenges those assumptions and re-poses the question 'where do you come from?' subtly but persuasively. Can anyone really say of countries, styles, or patterns: 'this is mine', and therefore not yours? Like the clays Cassell uses from around the world, we may be different in some ways, but we share much more.

Ellie Herring







exhibition | experiment generating new knowledge

emporary exhibition programming shares some characteristics with the fashion cycle in that it works to engender and satisfy a constant thirst for the new and unanticipated. This could be viewed as broadly populist, especially as museum and gallery programming tends to be more closely linked to marketing and educational philosophies than academic and analytical approaches. However, anyone who has installed an exhibition, or visited a good one, will recognise the potential to generate new knowledge through this act of placing concrete objects in specific spaces. Exhibitions are rarely just a re-statement of current understanding, an embodiment of the craft/design/art histories we cull from books and other narratives. The physical struggle to bring things into relationship with each other is partly driven by pragmatic and aesthetic imperatives but it sets up real-life collisions and resonances of visual and conceptual properties that challenge or illuminate our interpretations. Think of the art history lecturer who puts up two slides side-by-side to illustrate a point, or the television historian who transports us instantaneously from a church in England to a château in France to demonstrate a parallel or a contrast (the colour of the presenter's shirt remaining reassuringly the same – an anchor in spacetime). These cases are one-line simplifications of the complex inter-relationships and significant proximities that we experience in exhibitions. The numerous but finite array of things, displayed in definite respect to one another, exert themselves on each other and the visitor. The exhibition experience differs from reading a text where suitable exemplars can be plucked from anywhere or anytime, and condensed into one meaningful dimension as required by the argument. Real objects are three-dimensional, surprising, contradictory, and assertive, mixing them can catalyse unexpected reactions, and the result can be a previously unimagined observation. That is, exhibitions and experiments have something in common.

The shape of things is self-described as 'an opportunity and a context for considering and debating what distinctive contribution artists make to influence or reflect national identity, to connect Britain with global cultures, and to reference the intercultural nature of British society'. The programme has an ambition to establish a new paradigm for contemporary craft that sheds existing models for the role of cultural references and traditions in this field; it contends that these no longer encompass, nor explain, current creative practice. This is a project to carve out a new body of knowledge, and the totalising challenge of such a venture is reflected in the multiple aims of the programme: new creative work, new commentators, new critical texts, and new audiences perceiving craft in new ways. This is a lot of 'new's ... but the most

Pages 4 and 5: geometric design studies in Halima Cassell's sketchbook

Left: carved work, lightly burnished, unfired, clay from Germany promising thing is that the destination is unclear. A paradigm-shift is not a step-change or a business plan, it is a confluence of new, indisputable evidence and new ways of thinking about it that forces a completely revised framework, and produces previously unthinkable conclusions. As artists, curators, critics, and viewers we may feel at sea, inarticulate, and uncertain about what *the shape of things* is generating. This is an excellent sign.

Science and the crafts do not tend to see themselves reflected in each other, although much of craft is applied science, and much of science is skill with materials. In the field of science we are quite comfortable with the principles of experiment and observation as a methodology able to generate new discoveries and assess their importance. The mind's eye might conjure someone in a white coat, in a laboratory, with a notebook, or perhaps a computer, recording factual observations. Does this person seem preternaturally calm? Do they make mistakes? Of course experiments of all sorts are plagued by inconsistent, nonsensical results, human error and inclination, lines of enquiry that go nowhere, mirages of extraordinary career-enhancing observations that evaporate on closer inspection. The plot of a murder mystery novel would not be a bad metaphor for the achievement of many important scientific discoveries. But what the scientific method does have is a mission and a set of physical practices for fostering new thinking from within a body of established thinking. This is materially different from modern art's reactive drive for the new and shocking which arises from individualist and dialectical motivations. Good experiments utilise current understanding to set the stage for phenomena

to occur within a limited set of variables *but* with the space to perform unknown and unfamiliar happenings. This partly lies in the design of the experiment, and partly in how it is observed and recorded. I am not suggesting that contemporary craft practice maps onto, or should mimic, the scientific method. However, I wish to emphasise how essential *the shape of things*' support for making new work, and exhibiting it, is to the aims of the programme. Sponsoring nine artists to make ambitious work, and six venues to provide opportunities to encounter it, are crucial conditions for achieving an altered platform for making, interpreting, and consuming contemporary craft.

The shape of things' depressurisation of space for new making and viewing is particularly powerful and merited in the field of contemporary craft. Unlike many strands in the visual arts which chase, helter-skelter, an eternal contemporary, erasing their history, the crafts have an embedded retrograde element. Even the most avant-garde craft missions seem to include harking back, re-enacting, and recollecting, and in our brave new virtual world a fixation on real materials or hand processes can take on a luddite quality. The campaign to build an audience, a coherent critical language, and a commercial value often seems thwarted by the internal contradictions and subversions of contemporary craft (encapsulated by the term itself). But is it this very tension, this psycho-active baggage, that makes craft so personally and critically relevant? In our self-reflective society with our recognition of learning styles and personal pathways, our hypersensitivity and simultaneous anti-discriminatory blindness to nuances of difference and personality, surely contemporary craft is one of the

most complete incarnations of our ambitions to possess unique and authentic histories yet be dynamically flexible and innovative under all circumstances. *The shape of things* explicitly asks a question about the role of this vital link with the past, that makes sense of the future without strangling it.

What about the programme's other explicit question for contemporary craft – how is it inspired by cultural diversity and how is this represented in today's practice? New craft is an old associate of Romantic appropriation of cultural motifs. The aesthetic and decorative schemas of innumerable societies have been adopted as seductive or moral cloaks for craft objects. In a different vein, the reinvention or enactment of traditional or ancient techniques for crafting materials, have imbued 20th century craftworks with the gravity and mystery of a world cultural inheritance. Many beautiful, powerful, and useful objects have been achieved through these creative practices, and a great deal of knowledge and cross-cultural enthusiasm has been accumulated. However, our own complicated multi-cultural and global lives, together with critical discourse in anthropology, philosophy, and economics, no longer permits simplistic borrowings from, or submersions in, exotic artistic vocabularies. The shape of things attempts to start from the 'facts' of current practice rather than imposing an exhibition narrative that selects data and constrains outcomes. The nine programme artists bring unique, complex, and specific approaches to cultural experience and expression. Their works are propositions, questions, and meditations, rather than romances, adventures, or tales of conquest; they speak in the present tense.

As I write this I have a mental picture of what Earth Atmosphere at Bilston Craft Gallery will look like. We have drawn exhibition plans and drafted interpretation panels. I have some half-platonic, halfwork-in-progress, visions of Halima Cassell's and Seiko Kinoshita's installations for the exhibition. The artists and the exhibitions team have talked about motivations for, and readings of these works. We have imagined how Cassell's sculptural ceramic forms, with their earthy tones and coarse surface textures, will balance and contrast with Kinoshita's suspended, insubstantial, and brightly coloured woven textiles. We have identified themes, of earth and origin, and weather and atmosphere, that complement and refract one another and the premise of *the shape of things*. But all of this is virtual construction based on deductions, inferences, and pre-existing works. I am not a believer in thoughtexperiments and we look forward to being tested and astonished by the actual Earth | Atmosphere.

The experiment is running now, the reactants and their medium are selected. The challenge remains for us, the viewers, in the observation, recording, and interpretation of the results. Will we recognise the new when we see it? Can we stretch our perceptions and integrate *the shape of things* into a new framework for contemporary craft?

Sophie Heath

Curator of Contemporary Craft, Bilston Craft Gallery

Overleaf, left: detail of carved work, lightly burnished, unfired, clay from Belgium

Overleaf, right: detail of carved work in progress, clay from Belgium





earth | atmosphere: the shape of things

he shape of things is a contemporary craft initiative that is taking place over five years. It is providing bursaries to artists to make new craftwork in order to explore the distinctive contribution artists make to influence or reflect national identity, the intercultural nature of British society, and its connection with global cultures through a series of exhibitions, installations, and events between 2006 and 2011.

The origins of *the shape of things* lie in a report to Arts Council England South West into the potential for creating a contemporary crafts exhibition as part of Decibel, Arts Council England's national initiative to promote diversity in the arts. The report recognised a relative under-representation of black, asian, and minority ethnic craft practitioners and audiences for contemporary crafts, and recommended that exhibitions should be used strategically to explore diversity within contemporary craft practice.

As a consequence, with the financial support and partnership of the Arts Council, and in partnership with Bristol's Museums, Galleries & Archives, the ceramicist TakeshiYasuda, jeweller Vannetta Seecharran, and weaver Rezia Wahid were invited to make new exploratory works. In the process they considered the role of personal cultural identity within their practice. The artists presented these new commissions at a symposium organised by the Museum in Bristol in 2006 where a discussion took place with invited delegates, chaired by ceramicist Magdalene Odundo.

The success of this event, together with further encouragement and invaluable financial support from Arts Council England, enabled us to move forward. *The shape of things* is now working nationally and has received guidance from organisations engaged with the crafts including the Contemporary Arts Society, National Society for Education in Art and Design, Craftspace, SHISHA, Crafts Study Centre, Crafts Council, and Audiences Central.

The shape of things is privileged to be working with an exceptional group of artists and venues. Our first bursary was to Rezia Wahid who coincidentally had been awarded an MBE. Rezia's response to the initial commission was an important influence on the potential of *the shape of things*. The exhibition took place in 2007 at the Crafts Study Centre and enabled a test of the bursary-exhibition model.

In 2009 eight bursaries were awarded to artists working with craft media to partner with curators and venues to create new work for exhibition in public spaces. The ambition and scale of each artist's work is realised through their relationship with the curators of the public museums and galleries taking part.

The shape of things exhibitions in 2010 present the work of Alinah Azadeh and Rosa Nguyen at Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, Halima Cassell and Seiko Kinoshita at Bilston Craft Gallery, Tanvi Kant and Taslim Martin at Touchstones Rochdale, and in 2011 Maggie Scott and Chien-Wei Chang at The City Gallery Leicester.

Work by all these artists will be available to buy in a group exhibition at Flow Gallery, London, in autumn 2010. The participation of a privately run gallery in a joint initiative with public museums is unusual and indicative of the strategic aim of *the shape of things* to connect the work of artists with collectors.

These exhibitions give curators from our museum and gallery partners a rare opportunity to work closely with an artist, from the inception of the artist's work through to its presentation to their audiences and communities. Through its support of artists and exhibition partnerships with museums and galleries, and a series of discussions, workshops, and events, *the shape of things* aims to encourage a practice, audience and market for contemporary crafts that is representative of the society we live in today. This is perhaps best described in the words of the author and playwright Bonnie Greer, who chaired a debate at the launch of *the shape of things* programme in November 2009: 'This is some of the most intelligent and articulate explanations of diversity in art that I have ever heard ... This initiative, this collection of people is important now ... This is a movement, this is the beginning'.

David Kay Director, the shape of things

Overleaf, left: clays from across the world, stored in Halima Cassell's studio

Overleaf, right: shards cut off during the carving process, after firing, various clays

Page 16: part-carved work showing construction lines for the design mapped onto its surface, clay from Belgium

Page 17: Carved work, lightly burnished, unfired, clay from Belgium









halima cassell|curriculum vitae

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Selected exhibitions

201	Earth Atmosphere, the shape of things, Bilston Craft Gallery, Wolverhampton
200	Parcours Ceramique Carougeois 2009 Biennial, Geneva, Switzerland
	Arabic Arts Festival, Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool
	Ceramics from Great Britain, Bavarian Crafts Council, Munich, Germany
	Puls Contemporary Ceramics, Brussels, Belgium
200	Dreams Made Manifest, solo touring exhibition, 20-21 Visual Arts Centre, Scunthorpe
	Collect, Victoria and Albert Museum, London
200	World Contemporary Ceramics 4th Biennale, invited exhibitor, South Korea
	Halima Cassell, solo show, Yufuku Gallery, Tokyo, Japan
	Sculptural Ceramics, solo show, Wakefield Art Gallery, Wakefield
	Applied Art and Architecture, Bluecoat Display Centre, Liverpool
200	Sofa, Chicago, USA
	Summer Exhibition, Royal Academy of Art, London
	Ceramic Art London, The Royal College of Art, London
	Collect, Victoria and Albert Museum, London
200	Carved Earth, solo touring exhibition, Bolton Museum and Gallery

- 2004 Solo show, Blackburn Museum, Blackburn
- 2003 Placa de l'Angel, Barcelona, Spain

Projects

- 2009 Residency at the National College of Art, Lahore and Indus Valley University of Karachi, Pakistan (6 weeks)
- 2008 Residency at 20-21 Visual Arts Centre, Scunthorpe (12 weeks)
- 2007 A I M, Art Project at Rampton Secure Hospital (20 weeks) Residency in Fuki, Japan (11 weeks)

Public collections

Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery Bolton Museum Dundee Museum Gallery Oldham Harris Museum The Hepworth Gallery Jerwood Foundation Trust Peter Scott Gallery Trust Shipley Museum and Art Gallery Toe Gallery, Mumbai Victoria and Albert Museum

Public art commissions

- 2009 Blossom Way, wall sculpture, Northgate, Blackburn Six gateway sculptures for Ribble Valley Sculpture Trail, Clitheroe
- 2008 Paving and fencing for Barbara Castle Way, Blackburn Wall tiles relief for National Wildflower Centre, Liverpool
- 2007 The Flower Dome, Rampton Sculpture Project, Nottingham

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The shape of things

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The shape of things provides bursaries to artists to make new craftwork. It explores the distinctive contribution artists make to influence or reflect national identity, the intercultural nature of British society and its connections with global cultures through a series of exhibitions, installations and events from 2010 to 2011.

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The exhibition programme: Rezia Wahid MBE Crafts Study Centre, Farnham 25 September 2007 – 5 January 2008

Alinah Azadeh / Rosa Nguyen Bristol Museum and Art Gallery 6 February – 18 April 2010

Halima Cassell / Seiko Kinoshita Bilston Craft Gallery, Wolverhampton 1 May – 10 July 2010

Tanvi Kant / Taslim Martin Touchstones Rochdale 17 July – 3 October 2010

Work by all the artists Flow Gallery, London 9 September – 6 November 2010

Chien-Wei Chang / Maggie Scott The City Gallery, Leicester 2011





Above: tools for marking out geometric designs Back cover: detail of carved work, lightly burnished, unfired, clay from Germany

